

# PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

## PEER LEADER TRAINING AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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### The Faculty Viewpoint

At Washington University (St. Louis, MO), all of our peer leaders take a one-credit general studies course called Seminar in Academic Mentoring (SAM) during the first semester in which they are peer leaders. The SAM course meets one hour per week in a multidisciplinary group in which teaching methods and group techniques are presented. Currently, the instructor of this course is an instructor of the general chemistry course, which uses PLTL study groups, as well as the director of the university's teaching center. This course was developed and given for the first time last fall (Fall 2003) and the participants were the chemistry peer leaders. This year, the participants in the course include chemistry, mathematics, and physics peer leaders. There are two major goals of the course: One is to provide an opportunity for the new peer leaders to discuss openly with each other current concerns they have in the facilitating of their groups. The second is to discuss different teaching and group dynamics topics and to learn to apply these topics to the leaders' individual PLTL groups.

The course covers the following topics: preparing for a PLTL workshop (especially the first one), discussing the philosophy of the PLTL model, handling different situations, managing group dynamics, encouraging participation, using questioning strategies, acknowledging different learning styles and diversity issues, listening, promoting active learning, and self-evaluation of the peer leader role.

The peer leaders write weekly two- page reflection papers, a two-page self-evaluation paper, and a group project. The group project is the creation of a book containing a collection of essays written by the peer leaders on a specific topic. In the last third of the semester, the peer leaders collectively choose a topic on something they have learned this semester as peer leaders, which they would like to pass on to the new peer leaders. The book is then given to the next year's new peer leaders at the beginning of the semester. Last year's SAM class wrote on "the greatest challenge as a peer leader." This year's SAM students read that book this fall before their first PLTL workshop and wrote a two-page response paper. It was a successful endeavor for both sets of peer leaders. It was a culminating experience for the writers and an eye-opening experience for the readers.

Developing the course was time-consuming, because it was difficult to find examples of extensive peer leader training and indepth materials on different teaching topics developed specifically for peer leading. It would be helpful if there were different syllabi and materials readily available online to adapt. These materials could be in a database that instructors using PLTL could access. It also would be helpful to offer a workshop for the instructors of such courses to present ideas about how to train

peer leaders in the topics of teaching and group techniques.

Judging from last year's course evaluations and written comments, our peer leaders' training course has been successful. Last year's SAM class gave excellent evaluations to the course and said that they felt better prepared as peer leaders because of this course. Some of the leaders last year were second-year peer leaders and therefore had attended a two-day workshop as training the previous year. All of these second-year peer leaders felt that the semester-long course was still very helpful and better prepared them as leaders than the two-day leader-training workshop had done.

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### The Peer Leader's Viewpoint

Three years ago, PLTL was first launched at Washington University in General Chemistry. The popularity of this program has led to enormous growth each year. This success has led to PLTL programs in calculus and physics as well as an unprecedented enrollment in PLTL in General Chemistry. Our group would like to learn how PLTL is done at other schools and share our own experiences. Information exchange at conferences is a vital part of improving individual PLTL programs. In fact, past attendees from Washington University have brought back many interesting ideas, some of which we've even put to use - role playing among group leaders to practice group management, for example.

PLTL leaders are a vital part of the program. Their development is key to the success of the program. Support could include building on the PLTL leaders' interest in teaching by leading workshops. This may help meet the program's popularity despite the size constraints as well as encourage the development of PLTL leaders as future professors and teachers. In addition, PLTL leaders could be involved in research and publication, using these to disseminate PLTL. Moreover, these efforts would aid in sharing the practices and techniques used in individual programs with the national body of participating schools.

Some questions that all of us could help address include:

*1) How do other schools handle the volume of interest in the PLTL program?*

Our program has grown enormously every year. This year is no exception. Three hundred students came to our info and sign-up meeting, more than any other year. With this level of interest, PLTL groups have been enlarged to an unprecedented nine students each. Therefore, group and program size are concerns that we face this year and in the future.

*2) How do other leaders move efficiently through the four stages of group development?*

All the leaders have now learned about "forming, storming, norming, and performing." Still, everyone may run into rough spots through the group development process. Furthermore, larger groups this year require sharper skills from us leaders.

3) *What group learning and maintenance techniques do other leaders use?*

We are always interested in helping students learn the material as well as possible. Since each individual is different, the more ways we know of teaching something, the better we can help students learn.

Currently, the Washington University PLTL program in General Chemistry trains group leaders by teaching group management skills and problem-solving skills in weekly classes. Leaders write reflections on their weekly tutoring sessions, addressing any problems they had and how they resolved them or what they could do differently next time. Leaders have opportunities to observe other leaders teach PLTL groups as well as practice their own skills with a group of leaders before working with students.

Through my peer leading experience, I have worked out a method to help students understand the tasks, and be prepared to do problems even if they have not had enough practice with homework or in class.

- 1) *Go over key concept for the problem before doing the actual problem.*
- 2) *Walk the students step by step through the problem if they are confused.*
- 3) *Mind students' personalities while doing 1 and 2. If they are sensitive to being put on the spot, talk them through a smaller task, so they do not become flustered. If they need more time to work the problem, talk them through a smaller task, and ask the group to help when appropriate.*

Step one is particularly important because it saves time and prevents frustration. Things we learn from each other can make everyone a better PLTL leader and further strengthen our popular program.

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